

Translation and modernity: Ṭaha 'Abd ar-Raḥmān's project of renewing Islamic thought

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During a series of interviews with the al-Jazeera television channel in May 2006, the Moroccan thinker Ṭaha 'Abd ar-Raḥmān (b. 1944) recounted a personal story about the initial influences towards his intellectual development. The long processes of his intellectual search and drive for self-perfection were sparked by the profound impact on him that was left by the Six-Day War in 1967, resulting in Arab defeat.

I was a student, and that shook me deeply; as if I saw then that the path I follow in my ideas and works is not the way we should go. I was then overwhelmingly consumed by the question of what is this mind that has defeated us: a multitudinous community, firmly rooted in its own history?! [...] Because I contributed this defeat to some defect in our way of thinking, I rationalized that the intellect that defeated the Arabs and Muslims had something that was deserving of the victory¹.

This narrative of a personal epistemological crisis, triggered by the defeat of that war in 1967, is descriptive of the bigger picture of the situation that Arab-Islamic tradition is facing when challenged by its experience with modernity. The notion of epistemological crisis is

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/approaches/2006/5/19/1طه-عبد-الرحمن-تصور-جديد-للفلسفة-ج>

best suited to describe both the drastic change of historical and social conditions the Arab/Muslim world is going through – from its first encounter with Western cultural and political models – and the current situation of Arab intellectuals. The modernization process generated deep cultural, political and social transformations and violates the traditional foundations of Muslim society.

By reflecting on his personal reaction to the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān invites us to consider its greater effect on his intellectual heritage: that is, its link and inclusion within the larger epistemological crisis of the Arab-Islamic tradition.

The concept of epistemological crisis, a term introduced by Alasdair MacIntyre², marks a stage in the history of traditions when the tradition-constituted enquiry ceases to make progress by its own standards³. This period is characterized by the decline of the practices typical for any tradition, the ineffectiveness of former methods of enquiry, and the dilution of its standards of perfection. Such a crisis can be resolved by introducing new ideas and new concepts through the use of a different and novel narrative: one that not only explains the reasons for the stagnation of the tradition but, at the same time, proposes its renewal without breaking the connection and continuity with the past.

Thus, in order to create a new narrative for Islamic modernity, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān dedicated his intellectual efforts to link the modernization processes with the Islamic tradition, and to mobilize the moral resources of this tradition. In lieu of the Western view of modernity, typically defined by marginalization and loss of tradition, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān argues that in order to meet the challenges of the new world, the modern project of the Muslim community will only succeed by rethinking its own historical experiences, its own cultural traditions and rediscovering their powerful moral charge.

His project to reform Islam begins with rethinking the very concept of modernity and its relation to tradition. He argues against any uncritical adoption or adaptation of Western standards in order to define and understand modernity as it is one that is opposed to tradition. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān further insists that modernity and Westernization are not identical and should not be considered synonymous: that Western modernity is

² A. MacIntyre, Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science, *The Monist* 60, 4 (1977), pp. 453-472.

³ A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame Indiana, 1988, p. 361.

not exclusively the authentic one, even though historically it precedes all other (non-Western) experiences and contextual expressions of the same idea⁴. All these “multiple readings and experiences of modernity” raise the question of what constitutes its essence or common core.

‘Abd ar-Raḥmān advocates the equal right of every nation to be associated with the spirit of modernity:

In fact, the spirit of modernity belongs to every civilized country, to every country that has fulfilled the two imperatives for a claim to civilisation, namely the “constructional process” (al-fi‘l al-‘umrānī) representing the material aspect of being civilised (al-jānib al-mādī) and the “historical process” (al-fi‘l at-ta’rīkhī), accounting for the moral side (al-jānib al-ma‘nawī). Nations differ only in the degree of their fulfilment of these two acts, based on their accumulation of knowledge and human values over the centuries⁵.

In his reading of the concept, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān narrows down modernity to three basic universal and invariable principles and examines them in their historical manifestation. These constitute the essence of modernity: Spirit of Modernity (*rūḥ al-ḥadātha*), while their local and variable manifestations are the Reality of Modernity (*wāqī‘ al-ḥadātha*). According to ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, each of the three principles is based on two pillars: 1) the principle of maturity, or majority (*mabda’ al-rushd*), and its two pillars of autonomy and creativity (*rukn al-istiqlāl* and *rukn al-ibdā’*), 2) the principle of criticism (*mabda’ al-naqd*) and its pillars of rationalization and differentiation (*rukn al-ta‘qīl* and *rukn*

⁴ S.N. Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities, *Daedalus*, 129, 1 (2000), pp. 1-29, p. 3.

⁵ Ṭaha ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha. Al-madkhal ilā ta’sīs al-ḥadātha al-islāmiyya* [The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding the Islamic Modernity]. Beirut and Casablanca, 2006, p. 31; Ṭaha ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (Taha Abdurrahmane), Essence of Modernity and Right to Creativity, *Journal Islam Today*, 21 (2004), pp. 1-42, p. 5.

al-taḥṣīl, or *al-tafrīq*), and 3) the principle of universality (*mabdaʾ al-shumūl*) and its pillars of extensibility and generality (*rukn al-tawassuʿ* and *rukn al-taʿmīm*)⁶.

All these principles that constitute the essence of modernity imply that modernity can be induced and manifested in different forms and circumstances. The potential of any of the three principles cannot be exhausted through any single application, whether cultural or historical. As a result, ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān argues for distinguishing between the universal essence of modernity and its particular historical and cultural manifestations which makes /1/ the reality of the Western modernism as one of the many possible applications inherent in the very spirit of modernity; /2/ it defines modernity as an unfinished project which is open to be reinterpreted from different cultural and historical perspectives; and /3/ it defines modernity as internal creative process in the development of cultural and religious traditions and offers a new evaluating framework with common starting point(s) from which the different versions of modernity can be compared and evaluated.

Accordingly, his vision of Islamic modernism depends on two fundamentals: autonomy and creativity which are the pillars of the first principle of modernity: the principle of maturity⁷.

Explaining it, ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān refers to Kant's reflections in his well-known essay "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" ("What is Enlightenment?"). Following Kant, he argues that modernity entails a shift from a state of immaturity to maturity. Immaturity is explained as a dependency in thoughts and deeds and inability to take responsibility to own one's decisions. This dependency can be expressed as an unintentional aspiration or subconscious desire to blindly imitate others' ways of thinking, without considering its cultural and historical background. In order to be implemented, the principle of majority requires independent thinking which in turn calls for freedom from any higher authority and creates enough space for creativity.

In the specific case of the new Islamic modernity, freedom signifies liberation of Islamic thought and independence from the Western model (which historically has monopolized all interpretations of modernity and turned it into a colonial tutelage.) By copying the Western

⁶ Ṭaha ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*. p. 24.

⁷ For a detailed account of each of the three principles see: Ṭaha ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*. For the purpose of this text, the focus will remain on the practice and the role of translation, formulated and explored in details in the first principle.

way of applying the essence of modernity, Muslim society limits itself to the application of external features of modernity and fails to create its own internal modernity that denies imitation and springs from within its own tradition. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān criticizes modern Muslim thought that imitates the dominating Western concepts and theories, without taking into account the deep historical, cultural and political processes that led to their crystallization. He concludes that the power of creativity has been disabled in Islamic societies and that imitation has become second nature to them. Thus, this misunderstanding of modernity produces quasi-modernity which poses itself as the biggest challenge for Muslim societies and inhibits their ability to adapt and embrace change.

Hence, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān defines the main task of Muslim society today as emancipation from the intellectual tutelage of the West and calls for a shift away from the current state of “delusive”, “imitated” autonomy towards creative autonomy and true creativity. By emphasizing the post-colonial message of this statement, he demonstrates how the concrete context manifests the universal essence of modernity and its principles.

‘Abd ar-Raḥmān calls this new autonomy “responsible one” (*istiqlāl mas’ūl*) and sees its practical implication in a “true modernist translation” (*al-tarjama al-ḥadāthiyya al-ḥaqqqa*) which is understood as an equal cultural exchange that is mutually beneficial, thus, having the creative ability to “give and take”.

Hence, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān claims that a Muslim cannot enter modernity without renewal of his practice of translation. The renewal of translation guarantees reinventing the links with the Other and reconnecting with them⁸. In light of this understanding of translation, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān is revising the translation traditions in Arabic and reassesses them.

In the history of Islamic civilization, there are two main periods of translation activity: the ‘Abbasid translation movement from 8th-10th centuries and the modern translating process in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (*al-Naḥḍa*.) The first period marks the encounter between the new religion of Islam and the ancient cultures of Greece and Persia, when Islam had to cope with the spiritual confrontation of Hellenized Christianity and the dualist Eastern traditions whose ideas and concepts have been a serious test of traditional Islamic

⁸ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*. p. 148.

discourse. The second one marks the beginning of the Muslim revival and still continues to this day.

By comparing the two translation practices, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān considers translation activity not as an activity carried out horizontally in linguistic exchange between languages and cultures, but rather as distinct power hierarchies and a system of power relations, indicating ways in which one culture dominates another. He argues that translation, as we witness it in Muslim societies, reproduces the hierarchical relationship of tutelage and power. Following the principle of majority, Arabic translation has, in practice, misinterpreted the pillar of autonomy. In varying degrees, the two periods of translation imitate thoughts, ideas and ways of life that are neither deep-rooted nor organic in Muslim societies. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān refers to these two practices as imitations of both the ancient as well as modern thought – *taqlīd al-fikr al qadīm wa taqlīd al-fikr al-ḥadīth*⁹. As such, they both failed to initiate an Islamic Revival.

He states that despite this, those two periods are not similar because of the different balance of powers between the two cultures during the time these translations were made. In the first period, the Arabic speaking actors of the translation movement were in a dominant position, while the contemporary translators are in a weaker and more dependent situation. Since the ‘Abbasid translation movement was a voluntary act dictated by the desire to strengthen identity, the translation activity from *al-Naḥḍa* period is an unintentional emotion emanating from the self-preservation instinct of the target culture¹⁰. The texts translated in the ‘Abbasid era were well chosen to avoid contradicting the moral values of the recipient culture, whereas today’s translation activities lack control over the translated texts and violate the moral standards of Muslim society.

Both periods can be interpreted within the concept of the epistemological crisis. As previously mentioned, a means towards a solution is to create new conceptual and linguistic resources and theories that will help Islam rationalize its fundamentals and, in a critical self-reflection, realize the causes that have led to this crisis. This in turn allows them to activate their own creative resources to solve the issue. However, this cannot be achieved by a mere

⁹ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*. p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

transfer of foreign ideas and concepts into a linguistic and ideological environment within the tradition that is in crisis. In order to be acceptable and justified, these foreign elements must meet three important requirements: /1/ first, they must give solutions to problems that could not be resolved using the older methods; /2/ second, they must initiate critical self-reflection to explain the reasons behind the crisis and /3/ third, they have to be in line with the original tradition and must not contradict its moral values and rational standards¹¹.

Despite the indisputable contributions of the 'Abbasid translation movement (i.e., creation of new criteria and ideas that have influenced the formation of theology; the development of religious sciences and the emergence of Muslim philosophy,) 'Abd ar-Raḥmān argues that the mistranslation of classical Greek concepts and their mechanical introduction into the texture of Arabic language have led to the isolation of Muslim philosophy and perpetuates its dependency on foreign philosophical projects¹².

He also believes that the Arab Muslim world has lost its identity, because it lost its milestones for self-reflection and renewal and started to "perceive itself through the eyes of the Other"¹³, a process initiated from the time of 'Abbasid translations and that continues through to the present.

In the process of the gradual accumulation of cultural borrowing (*al-iqtibās*), its identity eventually dissolves in the identity of the Other, which began with taking concepts and problems that seemed necessary for the renewal of Muslim thought. By continuing this process, ultimately the entire cultural heritage of the Other is copied and used as a starting point for the renewal of the society – borrowing becomes a common practice¹⁴.

With these considerations in mind, 'Abd ar-Raḥmān argues that the role of translation is crucial in identifying the resulting fallacies and in debunking them. The question of responsible autonomy in thinking requires a high degree of self-reflection that each tradition should possess and a reconsideration of the relationship with the Other as a mandatory condition for self-criticism. Thus, the notion of translation must become central to the

¹¹ A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 362.

¹² 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, *al-Ḥaqq al-'arabī fī l-ikhtilāf al-falsafī* (The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference), Casablanca and Beirut, 2002.

¹³ 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*, p. 158.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 157.

debate about the Islamic revival, to reconnect with the past and to critically reflect on modernity, in general. In doing so, Muslim intellectuals must redefine the notion of translation and problematize the old translational methods.

‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s conceptualisation of translation is based on the socio-cultural context in which translation takes place. For him, it is important to judge translations within a social context where every translator must endeavour not only to transform an original into the target language, but to adapt the original to the needs of the receiving culture. Thus, he must “strive to achieve an effect on the Arabic speaking recipient and to satisfy his needs. And this recipient deserves nothing more than a liberation of his mind¹⁵”.

Hence, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān calls for a new understanding of translation, calling it “exploratory translation” (*tarjama iktishāfiyya*). For him, it is a translation that will reveal not only the creative energy of the original text to the recipient, but also allow him to master the creative power of the author of the original and turn it into his own creativity.

Translation is seen as an ethical and ideological activity rather than as a mere linguistic imitation because for ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān the translator has the responsibility to free the translation from the tutelage of the original. The concept of translation-as-exploration indicates that the role of translator is seen as an active agent of the translational process and as one who reveals the creative potential of the original on all levels of the text and cares about the role of the translation products in the recipient culture.

‘Abd ar-Raḥmān explains that, from the point of view of the emancipation of translation from the original, exploratory translation refers to the translation of three different levels of the text¹⁶: denotational (or conceptual) level that refers to the meaning of the original; the communicative level, which refers to the linguistic expression of the concrete and abstract meanings; and structural level, that refers to the grammar.

The new understanding of translation completely overturns translational practice understood as a simple linguistic transfer from the lowest to the highest level of language,

¹⁵ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*, p. 161.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 169, n. 17. This classification of levels in translation summarizes translation as an intellectual process. They meet the three levels of translation of philosophical texts that he develops in his book: *Fiqh al-falsafa. 1. al-Falsafa wa al-tarjama*. (Praxeology of Philosophy. Book 1. Philosophy and Translation), Casablanca and Beirut, 1995, pp. 299-409.

from the grammatical to the conceptual. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s exploratory translation prioritizes the translation of the highest level of the text – the conceptual one. This refers to translation of ideas and mental structures that build the content of the original. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān explains this practice as a “translation of a set of fundamental questions answered by the original and a set of arguments needed for those answers¹⁷”. That is the level where two languages and cultures can meet on a ground of common and universal concepts and values. It means that by translation the core ideas of the original, the Arabic translation’s recipient acquires knowledge of the mechanisms underlying the generation of ideas and their manifestation in the language-in-use. The translator has an active role in expressing those universal ideas in ordinary well-known lexical and syntactic units by preserving the linguistic and aesthetic norms of Arabic language. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān claims that this is the “way the translator enhances the creative potential of the recipient until he [the recipient] overcomes his inclination to imitation when facing new ideas expressed in common expressions and clear meanings¹⁸”.

If by mastering the translation on communicative and grammatical levels, the source text violates the rational and moral standards of the recipient culture, those two levels could be overlooked in translation. At this point, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān emphasizes the need for strengthening the linguistic foundation of the Arabic speaking community to generate new ideas by means of coining its own concepts according to the grammatical and stylistic standards of Arabic language and its linguistic conventions¹⁹.

The translation of each of these levels of the original text is a dynamic epistemological process in which the translator reveals the general difference between languages and cultures and masters the mechanisms underlying the creative process. That is the only possible way to reach the highest degree of translation which “expands the horizons of acquaintance between the author and the recipient, guides the Arab Muslim through the

¹⁷ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*, p. 165.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.166.

¹⁹ Mohammed Hashas, Taha Abderrahmane’s Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of Ethos, *Oriente Moderno*, 97/1-2, (2015), pp. 67-105, p. 78.

creative reproduction of the original and ushers in the renewal of Arab Muslim thought from within²⁰ “.

In the perspective of the translational paradigm of modernity, the exploratory translation suggests that human values have always been universal, but “their contextual interpretation have made differences and created diversity²¹”. Western modernity is itself an historical expression of universal values²².

It follows from this argumentation that the attitude toward one’s own Islamic heritage falls in the same translational paradigm. The second pillar of the principle of majority, creativity in thoughts, does not require a break from tradition and the Islamic heritage. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s project of creative modernization claims to be re-grounding the Islamic culture on its own resources and calls for creative reconsideration of the legacy. It means creative renewal and reinterpretation of traditional values: “We cannot break away from the past because such a break falls within the realm of the impossible. We may sever ties with aspects of the past that are no longer advantageous to us and recreate the beneficial ones²³”.

Arab-Muslim culture today is intrinsically bound to the previous culture. There is a kind of ontological dependency between them where a previous version is fundamental to the contemporary one. This dependency could vary from blind imitation of the original to its transformation and change. But what is important is that the dependency is genuine, and its structure follows the structure of translational processes. It is a kind of intracultural translation. Therefore, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān insists that Islamic modernity is impossible without a new reading of the Quran, because “it is the foundation of Islamic identity and the real reason for the existence of Islamic umma²⁴”. The opposition between the Western and Islamic versions of modernity can include the possibility that they both can equally realize the spirit of modernity²⁵.

²⁰ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*, p. 173.

²¹ Mohammed Hashas, Taha Abderrahmane’s Trusteeship Paradigm, p.100.

²² ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*. p.65.

²³ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (Taha Abdurrahmane), *Essence of Modernity and Right to Creativity*, p. 11.

²⁴ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha*, p. 193.

²⁵ Ibid., p.194.

In sum, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ’s understanding of modernity as an objective essence, “as values and principles”²⁶, common to every culture and nation, with ceaselessly changing expression throughout history, makes a path toward Islamic modernity with its unique historical experience and spiritual tradition. Therefore, the role of translation is crucial for the preservation of tradition and reconnection with the past as well as its constant renewal, and as a relevant aspect of the conceptualization of modernity.

²⁶ Ibid., p.175.